

IN THE CLAIMS

Please amend the claims as follows:

Claim 1 (Currently Amended): A process for the production of a semifinished leather product from an animal hide by comprising:

pretanning an animal hide with a chromium-free tanning agent to produce a pretanned animal hide,

wherein pretanning is effected with the additional use of a clay mineral which, after stirring for 30 minutes in water at 50°C at a circumferential rotor speed of from 5 to 25 m/s, has a number average particle diameter of less than 2 µm or a bimodal size distribution with a first, finely divided fraction whose number average particle diameter is less than 0.5 µm and a second, coarser fraction whose number average particle diameter is less than 5 µm, in each case determined by the method according to ISO 13320-1, by combined laser light diffraction and light scattering, the proportion of the first, finely divided fraction being from 10 to 90% by weight, and

wherein the pretanned animal hide is dried to a water content of from 5 to 45%, based on the total weight of the semifinished leather product.

Claim 2 (Currently Amended): ~~[[A]]~~ The process as claimed in claim 1, wherein the chromium-free tanning agent for the pretanning is selected from the group consisting of ~~the following list~~: aldehyde tanning agents, isocyanates, aluminum salts, oxazolidines and tetrakis(hydroxymethyl)phosphonium chloride.

Claim 3 (Currently Amended): ~~[[A]]~~ The process as claimed in claim 1, wherein the pretanned animal hide is dried to a water content of from 15 to 35%, based on the total weight of the semifinished leather product.

Claim 4 (Currently Amended): ~~[[A]]~~ The process as claimed in claim 1, wherein a clay mineral having a number average particle diameter of less than 1 μm is used.

Claim 5 (Currently Amended): ~~[[A]]~~ The process as claimed in claim 1, wherein substances which, owing to their chemical structure, ~~are capable of forming~~ form strong hydrogen bonds with the clay mineral, ~~in particular urea or urea derivatives, alcohols, polyols, propylene carbonate, organic amides, urethanes, saccharides or derivatives of saccharides, in particular nitrocellulose, sulfide cellulose or ethylhexylcellulose,~~ are added to the clay mineral before or during the use thereof in the pretanning.

Claim 6 (Currently Amended): ~~[[A]]~~ The process as claimed in claim 1, wherein the clay mineral is a phyllosilicate.

Claim 7 (Currently Amended): ~~[[A]]~~ The process as claimed in claim 6, wherein the phyllosilicate is selected from the group consisting of a kaolinite, muscovite, montmorillonite, smectite, saponite, vermiculite, hallosite, ~~or bentonite, in particular a hectorite, or an~~ and organically modified variants thereof.

Claim 8 (Currently Amended): ~~[[A]]~~ The process as claimed in claim 1, wherein drying is carried out at ambient temperature and ambient pressure, under reduced pressure and/or at elevated temperatures, ~~preferably by drying on a tenter frame.~~

Claim 9 (Currently Amended): [[A]] The process as claimed in claim 1, which comprises the further process step where the further comprising:

moistening the semifinished leather product ~~is moistened~~ with an aqueous solution of a tanning assistant which is absorbed into the semifinished leather product by means of physical forces, ~~in particular osmosis, preferably with an aqueous solution of a protein hydrolysis product.~~

Claim 10 (Currently Amended): [[A]] The process as claimed in claim 1, which comprises the further processing step where further comprising:

resoftening the dried semifinished leather product ~~is resoftened~~ by treatment with water or with an aqueous solution or suspension of a tanning assistant, ~~for example of an amphoteric or cationic polymer, preferably by spraying,~~ to a water content of from 50 to 80%, based on the total weight of the semifinished leather product.

Claim 11 (New): The process as claimed in claim 2, wherein the chromium-free tanning agent, which is an aldehyde tanning agent, is glutaraldehyde.

Claim 12 (New): The process as claimed in claim 5, wherein the substances are selected from the group consisting of urea or urea derivatives, alcohols, polyols, propylene carbonate, organic amides, urethanes and saccharides or derivatives of saccharides.

Claim 13 (New): The process as claimed in claim 12, wherein the saccharides or derivatives of saccharides are selected from the group consisting of nitrocellulose, sulfide cellulose and ethylcellulose.

Claim 14 (New): The process as claimed in claim 7, wherein the bentonite is a hectorite.

Claim 15 (New): The process as claimed in claim 9, wherein the drying is carried out on a tenter frame.

Claim 16 (New): The process as claimed in claim 9, wherein the physical forces comprise osmosis.

Claim 17 (New): The process as claimed in claim 9, wherein the semifinished leather product is moistened with an aqueous solution of a protein hydrolysis product.

Claim 18 (New): The process as claimed in claim 10, wherein the tanning assistant is an amphoteric or cationic polymer.

Claim 19 (New): The process as claimed in claim 10, wherein the resoftening comprises spraying the dried semifinished leather product with the treatment.